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¶11. (SBU) Summary: In an October 7 meeting with Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang, the Ambassador raised the following subjects: 1) Sam Rainsy's return to Cambodia; 2) Hoang Minh Chinh's activities in the U.S.; 3) timing of the Country of Particular Concern (CPC) designation and International Religious Freedom report rollout; 4) Pastor Truong's release; 5) the Proliferation Security Initiative; and 6) future USN ship visits. The Ambassador also delivered two demarches reported septel. For his part, VFM Bang raised GVN concerns about APEC and WTO accession. End Summary.

Cambodia / Rainsy

¶12. (SBU) Noting that the United States shares Vietnam's desire for regional stability, the Ambassador observed that the possibility of Cambodian opposition leader Sam Rainsy's return to Cambodia in the near future is a key component for the continued development and prosperity of Cambodia, and hence regional stability. During Prime Minister Hun Sen's upcoming visit to Hanoi, the Ambassador suggested that the GVN encourage Hun Sen to facilitate Rainsy's return. VFM Bang noted that Cambodia is now "almost an equal partner in Southeast Asia" and that it is consequently hard for the GVN to persuade them to do anything. He added that the United States has a strong Ambassador in Cambodia, implying that this might be a more appropriate source of pressure on this issue. The Ambassador replied that actually Vietnam "has a lot of strength" and that a "quiet word" from the GVN might be very effective. Bang remained non-committal, but concluded that Vietnam may have some influence and commented cryptically "we'll see if Mr. Rainsy supports Vietnam when he returns."

¶13. Comment: Given Bang's hesitance, it is not likely that the Vietnamese will exert much pressure on Prime Minister Sen over Rainsy's return, however they may raise the issue. Post will seek a readout of these meetings from the MFA. End Comment.

Hoang Minh Chinh

¶14. (SBU) Raising GVN concerns about Hoang Minh Chinh's political activities during his visit to the United States, the Ambassador reiterated that we take the GVN's comments seriously. After noting that we respect Vietnam's sovereignty, the Ambassador expressed concern that some in the GVN may wish to prevent Chinh's return to Vietnam. He suggested that forcing Chinh into exile would be counter-productive and would give ammunition to those protesting Vietnam's human rights record. The Ambassador pointed out that Chinh is 87 years old and has limited impact as an activist. Conversely, readmitting Chinh to the country would send a clear signal about the improvement of the human rights situation in Vietnam.

¶15. (SBU) VFM Bang replied that the GVN cannot accept these arguments. He noted that Chinh went to the United States for medical treatment, but he undertook political activities once there, actions that Bang claimed endanger state security. Bang said that the GVN takes such matters very seriously and that this could be the last humanitarian visit allowed because of this experience, and quietly added that he was not saying that the GVN would prevent Chinh's return. The Ambassador said that he understood Vietnam's views, but preventing such trips would be counterproductive as freedom of travel is an important part of human rights. Bang replied that the United States was at a different stage of development where that might be true, however in Vietnam security concerns are more important. The Ambassador concluded discussion on this issue by noting that he did not know if Chinh intended to stay in the United States or attempt to return to Vietnam.

¶16. (SBU) Comment: This is a particularly sensitive issue for the Vietnamese and they are not happy that Chinh has been outspoken while visiting the United States. However, they have generally kept their complaints at a lower level which may indicate that they intend to finesse the issue of his return. End Comment.

CPC Designation and Pastor Truong's Release

17. (SBU) Moving on to other human rights issues, the Ambassador informed the Vice Foreign Minister that CPC and IRF report rollout was delayed until October 17 at the earliest. The Ambassador noted that he had had a good discussion with Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) Director Thi about broadening our bilateral dialogue on religious freedom. For his part, Thi had already sent people to the provinces to investigate alleged violations, which was a positive development. The Ambassador further noted that the recent release of Pastor Truong from confinement in a mental hospital was also a welcome development, however, Truong had to sign a document acknowledging that he had a mental illness as a precondition of his release. This made Truong vulnerable to future official action against him. The Ambassador expressed the hope that Truong would be allowed to enjoy the same rights as other Vietnamese citizens. Bang did not reply.

Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI)

18. (SBU) Following up on past discussions concerning PSI, the Ambassador asked if there was any progress in GVN consultations on the issue, emphasizing that Vietnam would not be obligated to do anything by agreeing except to take a public, principled stand. Bang replied that the GVN is still considering its position.

Ship Visits

19. (SBU) Turning to the issue of ship visits, the Ambassador noted that the last visit by a US Navy ship to a Vietnamese port was in May. He reminded the Vice Foreign Minister that we had asked to schedule the next visit for the USS Blue Ridge for sometime in Mid-March, however the Ministry of National Defense said that this would be too close to the CPV Party Congress and that sometime mid-summer would be better. To date, the schedule of the Party Congress had not been announced so it was hard to judge whether this visit would overlap. Our goal was to make ship visits more routine and less high profile, the Ambassador emphasized. Bang said that he needed to research the issue further, as he did not know whether an earlier visit would be better. He added that he would prefer it to be earlier.

APEC and WTO

110. (SBU) VFM Bang turned to his desire to follow up on the visit of Prime Minister Phan Van Khai to Washington and to bring U.S.-Vietnamese relations to a higher level. The GVN wants to work with the United States on next year's APEC meetings with the hope that Vietnam will be able to maintain or even increase the momentum of this year's APEC summit in Busan, Korea. Bang also emphasized the need for both sides to prepare public opinion for the visit of President Bush during the 2006 summit. In that connection, he raised his concerns about Vietnam's bid for WTO accession and the growing perception that the United States is "blocking" Vietnam's accession for political reasons.

111. (SBU) Even without WTO membership, Vietnam's integration into the global economy continues; trade, investment and official development assistance are also increasing, Bang stressed. However, WTO accession has important symbolic significance for Vietnam and following the Prime Minister's visit, the Vietnamese people expected WTO negotiations to be concluded rapidly. The GVN wants to maintain momentum and is willing to send a delegation, headed by Trade Minister Truong Dinh Tuyen, to Washington to make a last ditch effort to conclude the bilateral negotiations this year. Bang asserted, however, that if negotiations drag on, the failure to conclude a bilateral agreement on WTO accession will damage U.S.-Vietnamese relations and the reputations of those who have been working closely with the United States. He warned that in the run-up to next year's Tenth Party Congress, there will be significant jockeying for influence between conservative and moderate party members, and the failure to successfully conclude WTO negotiations will be used against the moderates. The CPC designation decision could also cause problems for those who want a deeper relationship with the United States, he added.

112. (SBU) The Ambassador agreed that if one looks only at WTO negotiations and CPC, one might think that relations between Vietnam and the United States were stagnating. However, if one looks at the broader picture, there is substantial progress in the bilateral relationship, as evidenced by strong cooperation on HIV/AIDS, Avian

Influenza, ethnic minority issues, refugee resettlement and MIAs. The United States is committed to working with Vietnam to make APEC 2006 a success. As for WTO, we can conclude bilateral negotiations by the end of the year if both sides are flexible, the Ambassador stressed. More importantly, the reforms that Vietnam has undertaken as part of the WTO accession process are creating a favorable environment for business; finishing that work is vital whether or not Vietnam joins WTO. The Ambassador emphasized that it is not a question of whether, but when Vietnam joins the WTO and predicted that if we can finish bilateral negotiations by the end of this year, then Vietnam could join by mid-2006. The Ambassador also welcomed the idea of the Minister of Trade going to Washington at the appropriate time for further negotiations on WTO, but said the Minister's trip would only be useful if the necessary preparatory work has been done beforehand.

¶13. (SBU) Comment: While VFM Bang's suggestion that lack of WTO accession will be used against moderates at the upcoming Party Congress is something we have heard before, the fact that he raised it, along with the other political factors, indicates how much the Vietnamese still think WTO negotiations are truly a political issue. In a year where bilateral trade reached record levels (more than 6.4 USD billion in 2004), his assertion that the bilateral relationship is "stagnating" misses how critical real trade concessions and a better investment climate are to Vietnam's future, as well as its relationships with other countries.

MARINE